

HAPPILY EVER AFTER, ALMOST

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I'VE read a lot of comments recently from disappointed, disillusioned writers. Mostly writers who have had their first book published. It's been more than 10 years since my first book, *The Bone Flute*, was published by UQP, and the years since then have not been what I imagined.

Like many aspiring writers, I (not so) secretly believed that publication of my first book would be like the wedding that comes at the end of a fairytale. I had done the metaphorical sitting around in poverty and cinders, watching others go off to the ball while I polished my sentences till my fingers bled. When my first book was published, I felt as though I had passed through the magic portal, at last. As Jane Bryony Rawson wrote recently: 'Being published feels like the opening of a magical door. You're in. You're an author.'

Like fairytale weddings, however, getting published is just the beginning of a long, troubling and often mysterious series of adventures. There's a wonderful short story by Lucius Shepard, 'The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter', that ends: '... from that day forward she lived happily ever after. Except for the dying at the end. And the heartbreak in between'.

I don't want to mislead you: getting your first book published is a significant achievement. It is thrilling to hold your book in your hands for the first time, to open it and flick through it and see your words in print. Better yet, to see it on the shelves of a bookstore, or a library. To spot someone reading it on a bus. These things ... there are no words for how magical all of these experiences are.

Getting published, especially for the first time, may not be everything you've dreamed it will be, however. You may suffer from post-publication depression, and not for the reasons you'd expect. One writer admitted to falling into 'an unhappy hole once I knew the book would be published. A dear friend said, "Well, you've been pushing on that door for so long, it's not surprising that you fell flat on your face when it suddenly opened"'.

A couple of writers wrote about the 'disheartening' experience of being asked if they'd heard of or read someone else's book on a similar topic or theme. Having to smile brightly while, for example, a reader waxes lyrical about some book that they enjoyed which bears a passing resemblance to your own.

Unless you've been living under a rock, you're probably more than aware that the vast majority of writers do not make a lot of money from book sales. The authors I interviewed for this article were almost unanimous in stating that they went in with, as one put it, 'eyes wide open about how badly my book would do financially and how hard I would have to work to

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get it noticed'. Despite the statistically insignificant oddities – the Hannah Kents and Graeme Simsions – whose books earn them enormous advances and sales revenue, most writers who have a first book published can expect to earn, in the first year, somewhere between \$3,000 and \$7,000 from book sales, including their advance.

Very few writers I spoke to believed that they would earn enough to give up their day job from their first novel, though this (along with winning awards, and other markers of esteem) was a persistent ambition.

I wondered if this was partly a result of how first-time authors are represented in the press and online. Many of the writers

I spoke to about this article were nervous about being quoted. They didn't want to say anything that would 'reflect poorly' on their publishers. This might be because their publishers are fabulous, but it could also be because they're frightened. Writers are keenly aware that making public statements critical of publishers or agents could have negative consequences for their careers. Writers, especially little fish in the shark-eat-shark publishing pond, are reluctant to talk frankly about the ways their publishers have let them down. Instead, the writers who do speak publicly about their experiences of getting published are the ones who've experienced moderate to extreme post-publication success. These are the stories we hear over and over again, creating a pervasive sense that post-publication success is the norm, rather than the exception.

One writer stated that she'd be mistaken in her belief that having a book out would 'instantly' give her 'more credibility and push when it came to being involved in literary events and media opportunities'. And another admitted that she'd been

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naïve about how much impact having a publicist working to promote her book would have. 'I thought, "cool! I don't have to spruik myself anymore". I was, alas, mistaken. And since I didn't know I was mistaken, I missed a lot of opportunities to get my book out there.'

Some writers talked about their envy of other published writers. As unpublished writers, they'd perhaps been accustomed to envying and admiring published writers, but once they were published, things sometimes turned a darker shade of green. Annabel Smith wrote that, 'Sometimes the grinding sense of being perpetually undervalued makes it hard to be gracious about the success of others.'

Cheryl Strayed wrote a useful response to another jealous writer. First, she reminds them that what they feel jealous of is not the book, but the book deal: 'If you are a writer, it's the writing that matters and no amount of battery acid in your stomach over who got what for what book they wrote is going to help you in your cause. Your cause is to write a great book and then to write another great book and to keep writing them for as long as you can.'


What can you learn from this? First of all, remember that you did get your book published, and that's huge. HUGE! One

medium-sized publisher I spoke to estimates that they receive 5,000 novel submissions from unpublished authors every year. They publish maybe five novels a year, some of which are by authors they have previously published.

What else? Here are my top tips:

- **Foster resilience.** Have a balance of literary goals and dreams. A dream is something that happens as if by magic (enormous sales, a review in the *New Yorker*, winning a big prize). You have almost no control of the dreams, so try to keep them to a minimum. A goal is something you can work towards (finishing your second book within a year of your first being signed, sending stories out to 10 high-profile magazines). Working on your goals will help stir up the magic that makes your dreams come true! Remember how you achieved the dream of getting your book published? First, you wrote it, then you sent it out into the world. Magic!
- **Examine your expectations.** What struck me most in interviewing writers for this article was how many of their disappointments were related to their unspoken or unexamined expectations. They had expected a wide range of outcomes, such as: feeling better about their writing, feeling validated as a writer, getting reviewed widely, being invited to writers' festivals and other events, going on a book tour, finding it easier to get their next book published. Brainstorm a list of the things you think might happen a week, six weeks, and even a year after your book comes out. Which of these are realistic? Which are problematic? Who is going to make these things happen? How? What can you do to improve the possibility that your expectations will be realised?
- **Write a great book. And then write another.** I cannot reiterate this advice from Cheryl Strayed often enough. I don't want you to think that I don't think all of these other issues, about the lack of sales, reviews, awards, exposure, and other markers of esteem and success, are not important. They are. But they follow the work. And the work, the writing, must always come first. ■

Nike Sulway is the author of *The Bone Flute*, *The True Green of Hope*, *What The Sky Knows* and *Rupetta*. She lives and works in Toowoomba. She has been fortunate enough to win some awards and see her work reviewed in national and international publications, go to writers' festivals and even, once, wear a tiara while a ballroom full of people sang to her about her book. Still, it is the pleasure of the writing process that keeps her going.
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